CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2005

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It is the glad season. . . .
Hope is born again in the faces of children
It rides on the shoulders of our aged. . . .
Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things. . . .
In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.
We hear a sweetness.
The word is Peace.
It is loud now. . . .
We tremble at the sound. . . .
It is what we have hungered for. . . .
At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ. . . .
We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud. . . .
Peace.

Maya Angelou
Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem

Welcome to all on this Christmas Eve. Welcome to all who are our guests this evening. We are glad that you are part of our Christmas Eve celebration, and we extend to you our warmest wishes for a joyful and blessed Christmas.

More people want to be in church on Christmas Eve than we have pews to accommodate. And while we're not complaining—it's a nice problem to have—we know how disappointing it can be when you can't find a place. So if you have been seated in Anderson Hall and are watching on closed-circuit television, a special greeting and a thank-you to you for your presence and your understanding.

Finally, a thank-you to our ushers who do a wonderfully gracious job of welcoming us to worship every Sunday morning and who, this evening, do a particularly important job.

We will be open tomorrow, Christmas Day. There will be one service at 11:00 a.m.—Dr. John Boyle preaching—and our usual Sunday Vespers at 6:30 p.m.

Last Saturday evening, our brass ensemble, Tower Brass, presented their annual Christmas concert. It was very festive. The music was wonderful, the sanctuary full. In my introduction, I announced that our choir would be singing an elegant Christmas cantata, John Rutter's *Gloria,* on Sunday, the next morning. After the concert, a man approached me. He knew I worked here, but I don't think he knew in what capacity.

"I have a question," he said. "What time will the choir be singing the cantata in the morning?" I answered, "They're singing at the 9:30 and 11 a.m. services." "No, no," he said. "I don't want to listen to a sermon; I just want the music. What time do they sing?"

And so, chastened, I sheepishly told him what time to arrive, essentially to miss my sermon. It was sobering. I pondered it in my heart all week.

He had a point, of course. It reminded me of something the late Reinhold Niebuhr said. Niebuhr was perhaps the most influential Protestant thinker in the twentieth century. On Christmas, Niebuhr said, he and his wife preferred to go to a church where there was no sermon, where the liturgy and music carred the message, not the preacher. No preacher is up to it, he said. Music, art, drama are far better than a sermon on Christmas.

The words themselves are among the most familiar and beloved in the English language. We know them by heart: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. . . . And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger. . . . In that region there were shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night."

Author Kathleen Norris says that when it comes to the most familiar words, the danger is that familiarity sometime dulls or diminishes their impact. She tells about a New Testament scholar friend of hers who spent ten years of her life working on one small passage of scripture. She knew that passage in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, German, and English, had written a book-length, scholarly dissertation on that passage, could recite that passage upside down, backwards, forward. And then one time she heard the passage chanted by Benedictine monks and she heard things in that passage she never heard before. She heard it more deeply, in her heart. It was a moment of revelation for her.

That's what happens when we hear the Hallelujah Chorus or sing a beloved carol, "O Come, All Ye Faithful." We hear the story; we experience the story

deeply in our hearts. It happens to me every time I see the story conveyed in a children's Christmas pageant. It helps, of course, when your own grandchildren are in the pageant. I was particularly fortunate this year to see two: the first at St. Matthias Catholic Church last Tuesday and a few hours ago, right here. A three-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter was in both. She goes to both churches and is a one-woman ecumenical movement —way ahead of her churches, by the way. At St. Matthias she was in the angel chorus, an appropriate casting decision. Her moment came when the shepherds led the sheep down the center aisle—actually five-year-olds crawling on all fours. When the angel of the Lord appeared, a six-year-old blonde girl, and stretched out her arms, the sheep all cowered, pressing their foreheads to the carpet. The reader intoned, "Fear not!" and the sheep looked up as the angelic chorus, including my granddaughter, appeared for their important moment, singing "Glory to God in the highest." Just then, Joseph, a chunky twelve-year-old, stepped in front of my granddaughter, and all I could see of her was her halo. But it was enough, and of all the sweet moments of the season, that was maybe the best one for me.

She was an angel in a pageant here at 4:00 p.m. It was equally wonderful, a little chaotic. In fact, the Christmas pageant produced the best e-mail around here in the whole season. It originated in our Christian education office: "Hello all, We're on a search for the wings and halos. If you've seen them around the church please contact Donna or Jill." The pageant was wonderful, lots of little children, babies in the congregation crying, toddlers talking out loud, angels on stage waving, parents capturing it all on film, grandparents sniffing and wiping their eyes.

It's the way the story connects with life. It gets to us. It cuts through all our defenses and speaks to us deeply and profoundly. Ted Wardlaw, a good friend and President of Austin Seminary, tells about the year when his daughters were eight and five. They cleared off a table in the living room to display a precious family heirloom, a crèche, hand painted by one of their great-grandmothers. All the characters were there, shepherds, sheep, wise men, Mary and Joseph and the baby; they sat resplendent like that for a few weeks. And then Ted and Kay began to notice little additions to the crèche. First, next to a wise man, a blue-green pony with fluorescent hair fashionably swept to one side. A day or so later a couple of reindeer appeared. Finally, close to Christmas, a purple Styrofoam ornament bedecked with glitter found its place right beside the manger.

Ted, a good scholar and historian, said his first instinct was to remove all these extraneous distractions to preserve the scene's pristine clarity and historic accuracy. He didn't do it, however, because he realized that what he was seeing was "one person's longing to connect her life to that story."

That's a longing we all have—to connect our story, our hopes and dreams, our fears and disappointments, our deepest love and most painful grief, to connect who we are with that story.

"We want to bundle up all of our lives," Ted said, "our secrets, our needs, and the truest things about ourselves and place them at the manger."

It's a simple story about human life at its most human.

> A man and a young woman—she is heavily pregnant—travel from their home in Nazareth, to Bethlehem, the town the man is from, to be registered in a census. It is a long and difficult journey. He walks mostly; she rides on a donkey. If they find an inn at the end of the day, they have food and shelter. If not, they stop by the side of the road and sleep under the stars. Finally they arrive in Bethlehem. The inn is already full. The innkeeper allows them to spend the night out back in the cattle shed. At least they will be warm. During the night, the woman's time comes. Labor begins. The man helps, and she bears her baby, a son, and together they wrap him in the bands of clean cloth they have brought along, and after she nurses him and they both cradle him and each other in their arms, they place him in a manger, a feed box, to sleep.

A beautiful, touching story about a man and a woman and their baby.

But the glory of it is that it is also a story about God coming into the world in the birth of that child. And living in the world when that child grew to manhood—God living among us as that man lived and loved and taught and suffered and died.

The Christmas story contains the amazing suggestion that God comes that close, that God reigns not from a magnificent throne, but from a stable in Bethlehem.

That changes everything—changes the way we think about God and changes the way we think about human life and our own lives. The story of this birth tells us that every birth, every human child, is important to God, that every human life has the holiness of God's love about it.

And one thing further. Nothing can every separate us from that love.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

That's how the Fourth Gospel describes the coming of love into the world in Jesus Christ: light shining in the darkness.

The darkness you and I experience when we're afraid, when we're worried about our nation and the future, when we're discouraged because our young people are fighting a war and peace seems so remote. The darkness you and I experience when we're alone and isolated, downsized, out of work. The darkness we experience when sickness and aging and death seem so powerful and relentless and always present.

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Love has been born among us, and nothing shall ever separate us from it.

Tribune columnist Charles Madigan wrote last week about this year's Merry Christmas—Happy Holidays debate. Some people are complaining that the Christmas story doesn't seem to appear much in the media or department stores. He wrote, wisely I thought, "If you want a place to put the Christmas story, to revere it and nurture it and draw sustenance from it, then don't put it in Target or Wal-Mart; put it in your heart."

That's where God wants it to be—in your heart.

On a Monday afternoon early in December, we held our annual Christmas party for the residents of Presbyterian Homes in Evanston. About fifty or sixty attended. There were cookies, candies, punch, coffee. Four of our young pastoral residents organized and were running the party. One was delivering people in wheelchairs; one was reading poetry; one was leading the singing; and one was accompanying the singing on her flute. I was a little late and during the singing sat down at one of the tables and introduced myself to a distinguished couple, obviously dressed for the occasion. She had on a beautiful white blouse and red sweater; he, in a wheelchair, in a shirt and tie and sport coat. Millicent introduced herself and "my beloved husband, James." We shook hands. James smiled pleasantly. We resumed singing. It wasn't very good singing, but Millicent carried us along. She had a strong, clear voice, "Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing o'er the plains."

I complimented her on her voice. "Thank you," she said. "I used to sing a lot." James was smiling, tapping his fingers on the table to the music, but not singing.

Millicent took his hand in hers and explained, "My beloved husband has had a stroke. He's fine. But he can't speak. But he knows these Christmas carols, every one of them. I know he's singing them in his heart."

And so may we know this story in our hearts, and may we respond with heartfelt and grateful love.

Come to Bethlehem and see
Him whose birth the angels sing:
Come, adore, on bended knee
Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

Amen.